

The Resilience of Civil Society Activism and the Continuous Waves of the Arab Spring

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This article aims to make some observations about the dynamics and changes that have been taking place around and within civil society in the Arab world in three periods: before, during and after the Arab Spring uprisings that sought political change in the region. After two waves of uprisings, it seems clear that successive waves will continue to take place in years to come, albeit intermittently. Political change requires the consolidation of new political arrangements with enhanced democratic practices that all competing parties adhere to. The waves of mass uprisings in the Arab region are an integral part of this ongoing historic change. Within this process, the coming years will witness heightened tension and conflict between two forms of resilience currently clashing in the Arab region: a bottom-up resilience of organised political opposition and civic activism shaping up in various familiar or novel forms, and a top-down authoritarian resistance reinventing itself at local and regional level. Civil society activism lies at the heart of this historic and perhaps long process.

Introduction

A “second wave” of Arab uprisings hit the shores of Sudan and Algeria in March/April 2019 years after the “first wave” of 2011, igniting cycles of hope and optimism in public will and collective action in the region. These uprisings have rendered obituaries over the death of the Arab Spring ludicrous. Defying the authoritarian autocrats of Khartoum and Algiers, rejuvenated civil society forces challenged the police state, led millions of protesters in a peaceful showdown of popular power and eventually succeeded in throwing

two despotic presidents out of power. Tossed away with these corrupt men and their cliques were post-Arab Spring renewed Orientalist notions portraying civil society and civic action as inimical to Arab and Muslim contexts, seeing the Arab Spring as just a passing anomaly. Aside from the uncertainties of the possible outcome of the still unfolding Sudanese and Algerian revolts, both still provide profound evidence of the authentic and bottom-up resilience of civil society across the Arab region, even if authoritarian regimes manage to suppress it under the surface for long periods of time. This reactivated civil society fights against top-down

resilience of the deep and controlling state in the Arab countries that purportedly defeated the 2011 wave of Arab uprisings. This latter resilience of authoritarianism was only possible because of the “uncivil” and renewed Western, American and Russian support for Arab dictators and their “ancient regimes” in the region against the will of the people.¹

At the heart of the Arab popular mass movements that swept a number of Arab countries in late 2010 and continued over the following year(s), civic action functioned remarkably and effectively in peaceful collectiveness and expressions

In light of the above, this article attempts to make some observations about the dynamics and changes that have been taking place around and within civil society in the Arab world in three periods: before, during and after the Arab Spring uprisings. The differing nature and dynamics of civil society and its manifestations in these periods is hopefully captured by three successive sub-headings: controlled but maturing; startling and revolutionary; and unpredicted but resilient. Considering the Arab Spring as a turning point across which the analysis is straddled needs little justification. At the heart of the Arab popular mass movements that swept a number of Arab countries in late 2010 and continued over the following year(s), civic action functioned remarkably and effectively in peaceful collectiveness and expressions. A comprehensive discussion of Arab civil society is clearly beyond the scope of this brief account, as is an engagement with

the vast literature on the Arab Spring uprisings. Thus, the present analysis is far from inclusive, and does not consider civil society in the individual Arab countries that have experienced or evaded those uprisings. Instead, the inquiry here endeavours to offer some general insights relating to key underlying arguments about Arab civil society, and cautiously offers some speculations about the future role, dynamics and conceptions of civil society in the Arab world within the context of the parallel resilience of authoritarianism.

Civil Society before the Arab Spring: Controlled but Maturing

Within the Arab context and over the long decades before the Arab Spring, the public sphere had been strained to varying degrees under the heavy-handed authoritative state. Pockets of civic action were closely monitored and restricted, thus limiting their potential influence. Long periods of suppression and invisibility of civil society invoked frustrated questioning over the very possibility of the emergence of such society in Arab or Muslim settings; ostensibly, for their lack of liberal underpinnings. Many views stressed that the predominance of religious traditions, tribal structures and entrenched cultural and ethnic affinities were all unreceptive to Western-like models of civil society. More nuanced and informed inquiries debunked such views that condemned Arab societies to a state of eternal stagnation, freeing the debate from its Western orthodoxy, allowing for other forms of civility. In relation

1. In an impressive account, David D. Kirkpatrick not only dismantled the prevailing idea that Obama's administration was impartial in the events of the Arab Spring, thus helping democratic change to happen, but also exposed the then US collusion with the Egyptian military to overthrow the democratically-elected government of Morsi in July 2013; see *Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East*, London, Bloomsbury Circus, 2018; on European position(s) of the Arab Spring, see Ali Onur Ozcelik, “A Litmus Test for Europe: EU Mediterranean Politics After the Arab Spring”, in C. Cakmak and A. Onur Ozcelik (eds.), *The World Community and the Arab Spring*, New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, pp. 41-62, 2019.

to this, it is useful to make a couple of remarks on the conceptualisation of civil society that would help contextualise the discussion below.

Definitions and understandings of civil society differ, yet agree on some main themes denoting the existence of group and individual agencies that actively and voluntarily function outside the control of the state's or community's highest authority defending and expanding the interests and freedom of society. It is thus the forms of collective resistance and activism, along with their expanding sphere and historic-specific context that occupy this discussion.² Civil society as an analytical framework or policy-making perspective or other approaches is left aside due to limitations of space and the focus on the Arab Spring. Agencies of civic activism operate in various ways and directions but primarily challenge formal authorities and attempt to limit their inherent desire to impose full control over society. Although the term lends itself to modern Western intellectual-ity, long and mixed histories of cultures and nations around the world enriched the debate with varied experiences that substantively met and in many cases preceded the core "modern" construct of the notion. To this end and within Muslim contexts, the renowned political theorist John Keane notes that "the substance of civil association protected by law was common throughout the world of Muslim socie-

ties before European conquest."³ In brief and without delving into an expansive and already exhausted debate, civil society existed and does exist in a non-Western context in similar and/or different forms of dynamics and manifestations that are perceived as common in Western contexts.⁴

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The picture of the Arab political reality is far more complex than a mere binarism of civic forces pitted against authoritarianism. Islamist/religious formations constitute another powerful force that equally occupies considerable parts of the public space and the authoritarian space. Far from being monolithic, these Islamist formations are in fact diverse and compete with one another. Locating the individual positioning of each of these forces within the contentious realm of state vs. civil society in the region requires extra caution, as the Islamists spread over a wide spectrum of action and/or inaction. Some of the Islamists before the Arab Spring witnessed gradual transformation into democratic practices and participation, mostly Muslim Brotherhood-oriented groups; winning

2. The adopted approach here borrows the Gramscian notion of civil society with its emphasis on resisting the hegemony of the state and market; see M. FONSECA, *Gramsci's Critique of Civil Society: Towards A New Concept of Hegemony*, London, Routledge, 2018, pp. 93-113. Literature on civil society is massive but for further elaborations and definitions within the Arab context, see F. Cavatorta and V. Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism*, London, Routledge, 2011, in particular chapters 1 and 2, "Civil Society in the Arab World", pp. 8-19, and "Associational life under authoritarian constraints", pp. 20-33, respectively. More recent accounts with a focus on the Arab Spring are included in the contributions edited by C. Cakmak, *The Arab Spring, Civil Society and Innovative Activism*, New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017.

3. J. Keane, *Global Civil Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 8.

4. On this, see, for example, L. David, "Civil society in non-Western contexts: reflections on the 'usefulness' of a concept", Working Paper series, 13, Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2001. Within the diverse Islamic contexts and histories, see T. Anjum, "Civil Society in Muslim Contexts: The Problématique and a Critique of Euro-American Perspectives", *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 1, Spring 2012, pp. 27-48; and A. B. Sajoo (ed.), *Civil Society in the Muslim World*, London, New York, I. B. Tauris, in particular the helpful thematic survey by A. B. Sajoo "Introduction: Civil Quests and Bequests", pp. 1-34, 2002.

and losing partial elections in one country or another. Other religious segments, mostly with Salafi leanings, allied themselves with the incumbent dictatorial regimes. The Islamist “democratic” movements took part in the mass uprisings of the Arab Spring and turned out to be the most powerful and well-organised force. Almost in every individual country, Islamists have been divided into differing groups divided between shades of thoughts and praxis, whose bitter internal rivalry surpasses in many cases the struggle by some of them against the oppressive regimes.⁵

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Aside from the religious domain, another highly contested area in most Arab countries has always been the media, especially trans-border TV broadcasting. The latter created euphoria and high expectations connected to what has been known as the Al Jazeera effect, which started in 1996. Uncontrolled by national governments, dozens of TV stations were founded inside and outside the Arab region with an unprecedented ceiling on freedom and critical coverage of regimes. Although this media successfully provided platforms for dissenting voices, it was nevertheless incapable of creating political change. Governments were able to contain the relative freedom of these TV channels, letting them vent bottled-up anger but also gradually re-controlling the big

corporations altogether. On the eve of the Arab Spring, however, social media had gone beyond the capacity of governments to control.

The Arab Spring and Civil Society: Startling and Revolutionary

What happened then and what were the conditions leading to the Arab Spring? First of all, traditional formations and aspects of civil society such as trade unions, student unions, pockets of defiant media and certain religious expressions did exist prior to 2010, defying the status quo, but with minimal levels of success. More interesting were the newly-emerging formations of civic action that started to attain more influence and attention: a combination of youth energy and online activism. These new agencies surprised observers once the eruptions of the popular uprisings took place in Tunisia, first followed by Egypt then other Arab countries. In the years preceding the Arab Spring, the engagement of large segments of young people in social media seemed to have fallen under the security radar of the police state in these countries. Old-style security people were trained in, and grew up, monitoring visible gatherings and riots in the street, so the invisibility of off-street and online activism escaped their heavy-handed surveillance.

The accelerated energy and effectiveness of the mass movement led by new types of young activists surpassed and indeed shocked traditional and ideological forces including Islamists, liberals, leftists and others. As events unfolded rapidly, significant segments of those forces joined the uprisings. Also jumping on the bandwagon, if reluctantly, were older groups that waited to see the direction the events

5. Literature on the Islamist and the Arab Spring is very extensive now. For a brief account, see K. Hroub, “Islamism and the Arab Spring: Dilemmas of Transition and Structure” in M. Abdul Hadi (ed.), *Political Islam at a Crossroad*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and PASSIA, Jerusalem, 2014.

would take to opportunistically decide on their next move. In particular, two groups waited until the dust had settled to side with whoever turned out to be the winner: traditional liberals and Salafi Islamists. Many traditional mediocre liberals used to affiliate themselves with repressive regimes. Historically, these pragmatic and opportunist liberals acknowledged their inability to challenge the rising popularity of the Islamist forces. To compensate for weakness, these liberals pinned their hopes on the undemocratic and repressive regimes against the “reactionary illiberal” Islamists, even if they were democratically elected. The liberal argument was based on favouring the lesser of two evils. Also, as some liberals stressed, even if those unpopular regimes were repressive, they still hold the promise and potential of liberalising the society culturally and socially. In contrast, any Islamist party that could control power, even through elections, would impose conservative norms that would delay the “historic process” of liberalisation, and would also nurture the inherent propensity to use political repression as well as cultural and social illiberalism. It was a choice between certain political repression that is culturally and socially open and potential political repression that is culturally and socially closed.

The second reluctant and opportunist group of the Arab Spring was the Salafi Islamists whose resentment of democracy had always been expressed on the basis of it being Western and anti-Islam. They also resented and competed with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists that adopted democratic politics. Salafi support for the incumbent repressive regimes was religiously justified by the priority of keeping the community united and in order. They perceived the uprisings as a call to chaos that would eventually lead to

fragmentation and internal fighting. These two groups were very visible in Egypt and stayed in the grey area, shifting left and right in accordance with changing developments. After the fall of Mubarak as a result of the revolution, the opportunist liberals and Salafi Islamists formed or joined parties that shared their leaning, and ran for elections. Yet, when the army intervened in 2013 and practically returned the repressive deep state to power, they returned to their previous positions and supported the new/old regime.

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From a global perspective, the scenes of massive gatherings of people in the main squares of Arab capitals stunned the world and solicited great sympathy. One effective aspect of those mass movements was the use of peaceful means, far from the violence that was a trademark of police services attempting to crush the revolutions. The peacefulness of the uprisings certainly created a very strong appeal that quickly transcended national borders and guaranteed the support of people, activists and the media the world over. This reflected one of the main unifying elements that define “global civil society” and its formations, as argued by John Keane, which is that “their peaceful or ‘civil’ effects are felt everywhere, here and there, far and wide, to and from local areas, through wider regions, to the planetary level itself.”⁶

In short, a combination of well-wired and globalised youths, new forms of uncontrolled

6. J. Keane, *Global Civil Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 32-33, 2003.

media and enlightened Islamist constituencies that believed in joining forces with secular groups (in addition to the support of global civil society) created the critical mass that led to the uprisings and brought them success. The unification of these sub-spheres hosted remarkable civic action during the Arab uprisings that challenged old regimes and eventually removed them from power. What for a long time looked like a fragmented and controlled public space and weak civil society emerged powerful and full of energy, surprising everyone in late 2010 and early 2011.

Post-Arab Spring Civil Society: Unpredicted but Resilient

The fall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak in January 2011 at the hands of the revolution sounded all the alarms: if such a powerful and security-based regime as Mubarak's had fallen in the face of mass revolution then no other Arab regime could be saved. Fears that Arab uprisings would move contagiously across the region prompted nervous regimes to quickly absorb the shock then gear up to offensive strategies aimed at preserving the long-rotten status quo they have created and controlled. These strategies moved from protecting the national realm of autocratic politics to the creation of a regional bloc of similar nervous regimes with the determination to proactively and collectively attack civic action that aspires for change. From the perspective of the "counter-revolutions axis", two intertwined Arab Spring empowering capacities within the public had to be nipped in the bud: the capacity to revolt, and the capacity to effect change

at the highest level of power. To achieve this, a counter-revolutionary alliance took shape, comprising Egypt (after the military coup of 2013, which re-routed the country to pre-Arab Spring authoritarian mode under Sissi's rule), Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain.⁷

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With the above in mind, the following analysis attempts to engage with two inter-related aspects. First, to examine the strategies of the counter-revolutionary regimes whose goals focused on reversing the changes both in individual countries and across the region as a whole to their pre-Arab Spring modus vivendi, and aborting any potential uprising that would emulate those of 2011. Central to these strategies has been the targeting and dismantling of the dynamics, structures and spirit of civil society that emerged in the region during the Arab Spring. Second, to briefly discuss the recent mass uprisings in Sudan and Algeria as a manifestation of civil society resilience in the region, challenging the regional hegemony of the counter-revolutionary alliance. Against an atmosphere of frustration and pessimism in the region because it was felt that the Arab Spring and its civic forces have been defeated, these two uprisings reversed the tide and brought public activism and its potential to effect change back to the forefront.

7. Discussions on the counter-Arab Spring forces and countries have become considerable, and some observers captured the immediate rise of anti-revolutionary politics early on. See, for example, M. Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution", *ScienceDirect*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2012, pp. 96-104: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438711000937>. See also Marc Lynch's writings on the subject and the workshops and publications on the Arab Spring of the project that he leads, the Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), <https://pomeps.org/about/>

Strategies to counter the uprisings by the rentier states of the Arab Gulf such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar first revolved around offering new privileges for their nationals that included raising salaries and increasing subsidies. They intended to offset any rising tendencies of protest within their publics, and buy loyalty. Less wealthy Gulf States, such as Bahrain and Oman where serious protest surfaced to varying degrees, received immediate financial support from other Gulf governments. In the case of Bahrain, where the protest was indeed a threat to the regime, the Saudis and Emiratis further supported the regime by sending military troops to help suppress the uprising, thus keeping the Gulf sphere clean from protest or even inspiration.⁸ Other Arab monarchs that lacked resources, such as Jordan and Morocco, undertook immediate constitutional reforms that aimed to contain the protest and include opposition parties in government. In parallel, security measures and surveillance applied more pressure and vigilance to all forms of civic action in these countries, be it on the street or online. Once the internal front was fortified, the Saudis and Emiratis led a regional offensive and intervention targeting Egypt first and then Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, where the uprisings succeeded in toppling regimes, and overtly assisting anti-revolutionary forces. Their efforts bore fruit in Egypt when the military intervened in July 2013, a year after the Muslim Brotherhood and President Mohammed Morsi won the elections and came to power.

On the larger scale of hard politics and military, Saudi and Emirati material and political support was directed to branches of the “deep state” in the affected countries of the

uprisings, and deploying a massive political and media campaign against what they termed and lumped together as the “forces of terrorism.” The same countries in addition to Iran played a central role in Syria by supporting opposing parties that effectively prolonged and regionalised the war. The peaceful Syrian uprising that stayed as such for almost six months (roughly between March 2011 and September 2011) was transformed into a civil and bloody proxy war after the involvement of extremist Jihadist groups and regional rivals. The effect of “uprising by example” was turned on its head, serving the regimes of the counter-Arab Spring in delivering a bold and frightening message to their peoples that uprisings lead to chaos, blood and instability, and create a receptive environment for terrorism. And on the pretext of fighting terrorism employed by the counter-revolutionary countries, activists were jailed and parties and media were shut down. The party that won free and fair elections in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, and all their branches in the region were designated as “terrorist organisations” not only by the Egyptian government but also by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain.

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Another strategy against civic action and potential political change focused on soliciting Western and American support for the counter-revolutionary regimes. This was

8. The government of Bahrain called for help from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and military troops mostly from Saudi Arabia and the UAE moved in the country in March 2011 to support the regime. See “Peninsula Shield Force: Gulf troops move in as Bahrain protests escalate”, 15 March 2011, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/132454/saudi-troops-enter-bahrain-as-protests-escalate/>

very much helped by the coming of Donald Trump to power in the United States in 2016 with his prioritised agenda in the region that indeed trumped democracy and human rights almost entirely. Trump's overriding interests in the region included increasing arms deals in the Gulf, supporting Israel in all forms and confronting Iran. These concerns required keeping the Arab people sidelined and muted as public opinion across the region is fiercely against these imposed priorities. Timid and hypocritical European policies stayed in the shadow but also joined the fray of selling more arms to the Gulf States, eschewing any rhetoric over democracy, civil society and human rights.

In the realm of soft power influence, counter-revolutionary regimes discovered the stealth and crucial role of social media, immediately crippling it in their countries. As noted by many, "authoritarian regimes have come to value digital media [and] security services in Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria observed how democracy advocates were using social media in Egypt and Tunisia, and they developed counterinsurgency strategies that allowed for surveilling, misleading, and entrapping protesters."⁹ In fact, tactics moved from silencing voices of protest to swamping the media with fake news against activists and deploying "cyber armies" in charge of flooding social media with pro-regime propaganda and creating news trends to cover criminal activities.¹⁰

Another yet by no means final strategy used by these regimes has been the adoption and promotion of what they proclaimed as "moderate Islam", intending to delegitimise "moderate" political Islam groups, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood and their like. Religious

institutions for fatwa-producing and pan-Arab and pan-Islamic organisations of religious scholars loyal to regimes were established. In parallel to these, governments sponsored intellectual and cultural think tanks and publishing houses in charge of debating and refuting the arguments of rival Islamist groups. A prime example of the latter is Believers Without Borders, an Emirati-sponsored foundation with branches in several Arab countries from Jordan to Morocco.¹¹

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Nonetheless, events and civic action in Sudan and Algeria gradually evolved in 2019 in ways that echoed what the world had seen in 2010 and 2011. Activism in the street and online joined forces by creating a solid front that demanded that the incumbent autocrats step down. These uprisings went through two broad phases similar to those of the first wave. The first is the success in removing the regime by revolutionary persistence and occupying the public space. This seems to be the easier phase despite the sacrifices and deaths in some cases – dozens were killed during the Sudanese uprising. The second and thorny phase is the nature of the change and arrangements towards which the political system subsequently moves. In all countries where uprisings succeeded in the first phase, the deep state strived to retain its

9. P. N. Howard and M. M. Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave?*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 70, 2013.

10. E. Groll, "The Kingdom's Hackers and Bots", 19 October 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/19/the-kingdoms-hackers-and-bots-saudi-dissident-khashoggi/>

11. M. Omar, "How the UAE created a cultural community loyal to its agenda" [in Arabic], 16 July 2017, <https://www.ultrasawt.com/نفاقت/ببدا/رم-ع-ادم؟!احتدن جال-ايل و م-اي فاقث-اعمت جمت ار امل استقل خ غفكي/>

main structures in the second phase through superficial compromises. The military, security forces and crony business community and other entrenched groups in the old regime attempted to maintain and steer the levers of power and the new arrangements in their interest. The Egyptian case after the fall of Mubarak was the typical example where change seemed to have taken place on the surface, whereas the deep state remained powerful, organised and capable of co-opting the inexperienced young activists and their goals. In the Sudanese and Algerian examples, activists received a torrent of “advice” from Egyptian and other revolutionaries warning them to be vigilant of the role and deceptive tactics of the army and other centres of traditional power. Moreover, the Sudanese and Algerians were given two more pieces of advice: to make their demands clear and consensual and reject any foreign intervention no matter what.¹² At the time of writing, events in Sudan and Algeria continue to develop without showing a clear outcome.

Conclusion

It is always difficult to make predictions in politics, more so when it comes to Middle East politics. However, the march to free societies and against authoritarianism is in line with the progress of history, underpinned by people’s strong desires and longings. A decade prior to the Arab Spring, and against the then dominant pessimism, few predicted the future crucial role of civil society. One prediction by an Iraqi human rights advocate was indeed remarkable: “In an article for the *Journal of Democracy* in 2000, Laith Kubba proclaimed

that the ‘awakening of civil society’ in the Arab world would be the decisive factor in challenging the authoritarian regimes in the region and eventually leading the Arabs to the ‘promised land’ of democratisation.”¹³ In the same line of hope and optimism, one must say that the same civil society that led to the 2011 Arab Spring will remain resilient in surprising forms, joining forces with other agencies in the region and bringing freedom and democracy to its peoples.

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A persistent lesson of the past decade in the Arab region points to the enormous and renewed capacities of the people despite all repressive odds internally and shameful neglect externally. The resilience of Arab civil society, its manifestations, inherent energies, sudden and surprising moves and creativity of its youth has certainly become part of that future. As long as primordial authoritarianism continues to dominate the public sphere in most Arab countries, deep-rooted and acute socio-economic problems will remain unresolved. This means that conditions for potential rising of public protest will continue to boil up under the surface. Thus, successive waves of popular uprisings will continue to take place in years to come even if intermittently. Political change requires the consolidation of new political arrangements with enhanced democratic practices that all competing parties adhere to. The

12. See, for example, the advice of Alaa abd El Fattah, a leading Egyptian activist who served five years in jail after the military came to power in 2013, “Advice for revolutionaries”, 28 April 2019, <https://madamasr.com/en/2019/04/28/opinion/u/advice-for-the-revolutionaries/>

13. F. Cavatorta and V. Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism*, London, Routledge, p. 8, 2011.

waves of mass uprisings in the Arab region are an integral part of this ongoing historic change. Within this process, the coming years will witness heightened tension and conflict between two forms of resilience currently clashing in the Arab region: a bottom-up resilience of or-

ganised political opposition and civic activism shaping up in various forms known or novel, and a top-down authoritarian resistance reinventing itself at local and regional level. Civil society activism lies at the heart of this historic and perhaps long process.